

MAP 10

Sickles Moves Forward

9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

To Meade's great satisfaction, additional units of the Federal army continued to arrive at Gettysburg throughout the morning on July 2. The lead elements of Daniel Sickles' Third Corps marched up the Emmitsburg Road at around 9:00 o'clock, turning east toward Cemetery Ridge at the Peach Orchard (1). Though ordered to march to Gettysburg the night before, Sickles did not have his men on the road until 4:00 a.m. and they had covered only about nine miles in five hours. Still, here they were at last, and Meade directed Sickles to form his corps on Hancock's left extending the Union line to Little Round Top (2).

A New York Congressman before the war, Sickles owed his original appointment as brigadier general to the fact that he was a War Democrat with ties to Tammany Hall. Though he had performed well enough as a brigadier to gain promotion to major general, he was largely inexperienced as a corps commander. His lack of experience did not dampen his self-confidence, however. On the morning of July 2, as he looked around the position Meade had assigned him, he did not like the look of it. His left flank was completely unguarded—in the air as the saying went. Moreover, the ground to his front along the Emmitsburg Road was actually higher than his own. If the Confederates brought artillery to the high ground around the Peach Orchard, it could sweep his position. Though another officer might simply assume that Meade knew what he was doing, Sickles had more confidence in his own judgement than he did in Meade's.

At 10:00, therefore, Sickles rode to Meade's headquarters to argue that his corps should move forward to occupy the slightly higher ground to his front. He invited the commanding general to come view the position for himself. Meade declined; he had ridden over the ground eight hours before, and in any case he was busy. Sickles then asked if Meade would send a staff officer to look at the ground and Meade agreed to send Brigadier General Henry J.

Hunt. Back on Cemetery Ridge, Hunt agreed with Sickles that the ground along the Pike was slightly higher, especially near the Peach Orchard, but Hunt declined to authorize Sickles to change his position. After all, Sickles' was only one of seven Federal army corps, and the strength of his own position did not matter nearly as much as how it supported the overall Federal line.

Sickles was not satisfied. Soon after Hunt left him, he noted that Buford's cavalry, which had been guarding his front and flank, moved off to the rear in conformance with earlier orders. This made Sickles even more nervous for the security of his flank. He decided to send a company of sharpshooters forward to see what enemy forces, if any, were in the treeline along Seminary Ridge. The sharpshooters advanced at 1:00 and soon ran into a heavy concentration of rebels in the woods. As far as Sickles was concerned, that was decisive. At 2:00, he ordered David Birney's division to move forward to the high ground at the Peach Orchard, and an hour later he ordered A. A. Humphreys' division forward as well.

Sickles' new position jutted out from Cemetery Ridge at a thirty degree angle to run along the eastern edge of the Emmitsburg Road (3). At the high ground of the Peach Orchard, it turned ninety degrees to the left and ran along a farm road back toward a wheatfield (4). From there it followed a branch of Plum Run to a jumble of massive boulders that came to be known as the Devil's Den (5).

While Sickles was moving his divisions forward, the first elements of John Sedgwick's Sixth Corps began to arrive at Gettysburg after a hard march of some thirty four miles. Since the Sixth Corps was the largest in the army, Meade was especially pleased to see it. Feeling more secure than he had at any time since the night before, Meade finally rode south to inspect Sickles' position around 4:00 p.m. When he got there he was astonished to find that Sickles had thrust his corps forward to the Emmitsburg Road. Positively furious, Meade lost his famous temper. He turned and pointed back to Cemetery Ridge telling Sickles: That is where you should be! Sickles offered to move back at once, but Meade knew it was impossible. "I wish to God you could," he said, "but the enemy won't let you."

As if to underscore his words, a discharge of artillery not far off indicated that Lee was now, finally, beginning his attack, and his target was Sickles' exposed salient.

